

The Earring

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Summary: Oneshot. Tony, in a classic mid-life crisis move, has gotten himself an ear piercing. He's in denial about it being infected. The team is constantly distracted by it, examining it and making suggestions to Tony. Gibbs, fed up by Tony's stubbornness as well as the lack of work getting done, finally takes matters into his own handsâ€¦literally.

The Earring

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"So, whaddya think?" asked Tony with a proud grin. He was standing in front of his desk on a Monday morning while Ellie and Tim leaned in to examine the new, gold stud earring in his left ear.

"Do you want the truth, erâ€¦?" Ellie began.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tony asked with a frown.

"Well, it sort of screams 'mid-life crisis'," Ellie shrugged.

"No it doesn't!" Tony replied. "Mid-life crisis is going out and getting a vintage car twenty years older than you, and a girlfriend twenty years younger. Thisâ€¦this is _style_."

"Is it supposed to be that red?" Tim asked, squinting at Tony's earlobe.

"Of course. I only got it on Saturday. Takes a few days to settle in."

"Why don't you cut the chit chat and settle in to your desks?" said Gibbs, rounding the corner with his first coffee of the day and stopping in front of his team.

"Morning, Boss," said Tony. "They were just admiring my new look. Like it?" He turned his head and thrust his left ear toward his boss.

Gibbs didn't look. "What I'd like is for everyone to forget about your mid-life crisis and get back to work."

"We don't have a case right now," said Tony. "And this isn't a mid-lifeâ€"

"There are still reports to be done," interrupted Gibbs. "And there's a briefing with Vance tomorrow to prepare for." He looked around at all three of his team members. "Find some work to do, or I'll find you some."

"Right, boss," they all said at once, and scattered back to their desks.

* * *

><p>By the end of the day, no new cases had come in. The team was chatting before leaving for the day, and the conversation returned to Tony's earring.<p>

"I think it's getting redder," said Tim, leaning in for a closer look.

"You don't understand, Probie," said Tony. "That's how piercings work. They don't take right away. They have to get worse before they get better."

"Mmm, no they don't," Ellie said. "Tony, I have my ears pierced. They've never been that red."

Tim was still examining Tony's ear closely. He slowly lifted a finger to touch it, but Tony swatted him away.

Tony looked back at Ellie and shrugged.

"It's different for guys."

Ellie opened her mouth to argue, when Gibbs rounded the corner again.

"Quit talking about the damned earring. Either go home, or get back to work."

"Bye!" Ellie and Tim said, nearly bumping into each other in their haste to reach the elevator.

Gibbs walked up to Tony and stared at his earring for several seconds. Then he rolled his eyes and walked away without a word, shaking his head to himself.

* * *

><p>The next day, Gibbs went to use the washroom and saw Tony there, leaning close to the mirror, examining his swollen earlobe, trying not to wince in pain.<p>

"DiNozzo, you still wearing that thing?"

"Of course!" said Tony. "I think the worst is overwith. It should be better by tomorrow."

Gibbs was still standing by the washroom door. "The hell are you talking about? It's infected, DiNozzo. I can tell from over here." He walked over to get a closer look.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Tony replied stubbornly. "It's fine!"

"Tony," Gibbs began, trying to reason with the younger agent. "You been able to sleep on your left side since you got that thing?"

"No, but they said it would take a couple daysâ€"

"Does your ear feel hot to the touch?"

Tony paused and frowned. "You mean it shouldn't?"

Gibbs decided a wake-up call was in order.

"Does it hurt when I do this?" And before Tony could react, Gibbs reached up and flicked Tony's earlobe with his finger.

"_Aghghghgh!_" Tony staggered back in pain and cupped his hand over his ear, sucking in breath through gritted teeth. He gave Gibbs a look of utter shock and incomprehension.

"Boss! _Why?_ Why would you _do_ that?" he gasped. "Is it bleeding?" He turned back to the mirror to look.

"I know what I'm taking about," Gibbs continued, still trying to reason with Tony. "If you don't do something about it now, it'll be a lot worse when it finally does come out." He gave Tony a significant look before adding, "Trust me. I do know what I'm talking about."

Tony was only half-listening, still looking at his ear in the mirror, so he didn't ask his boss to elaborate. "Thanks, Boss," he said absently, "but I got this under control. Really. As long as no one flicks it again!"

Gibbs was losing patience. "That earring is wasting your and the team's valuable time. We've got work to do. You got the slides ready for the briefing with the director? Meeting's in ten."

A look of panic suddenly crossed Tony's face at Gibbs's words, and he raced past his boss and out of the bathroom.

"Get rid of that thing, DiNozzo!" Gibbs called after him.

* * *

><p>The next morning, Tim, Ellie and Abby were gathered around Tony's desk examining his ear, which was now undeniably infected.<p>

"It's really swollen," said Tim, sounding concerned.

"It's kind of crusty," said Ellie with a grimace.

"It'sâ€¦oozing," said Abby, more fascinated than anything else.

"Why don't you take it out already?" asked Tim.

"Gee, McObvious, why didn't I think of that?" Tony said sarcastically. "I tried last night, but it hurt too much, okay? But there's still a chance that the infection will go away on its ownâ€¦right?"

Gibbs arrived in the bullpen at that moment to tell the team to gear up. He had just gotten a call on his cell about a body in a downtown park. When he saw the team gathered around Tony, distracted yet again by that damned earring, Gibbs didn't hesitate any longer. Nobody had noticed him yet, so he silently walked away to get some supplies.

When he returned, he walked right up to Tony's desk. Ellie, Abby and Tim noticed him at the last moment and parted to make way.

Tony tensed up when he noticed Gibbs. He looked at his boss's hands. In one hand were two small pairs of needle-nose pliers; in the other, a box of tissue and a small bottle. Gibbs advanced on Tony, who was now trapped behind his desk.

Tony stood up and started to back away. "Boss, let's be reasonable about this. I'll go to the doctor over lunch. I'll be good as new by this afternoon!"

"You don't have that long," said Gibbs. "I just got a call. There's a body downtown. We got five minutes to grab our gear and be on the road. You're coming; that thing isn't."

He had backed Tony into the corner of his cubicle. Tony started to sweat. He looked pleadingly at the rest of his team, but they only watched with a mixture of horror and amusement at what was happening.

Seeing Tony's state of panic, Gibbs relented slightly. "You want to go to the head and take it out yourself, be my guest," he said. "But you got a minute and a half to be back here gearing up."

Tony didn't move. His mind seemed to be working through all possible ways out of the situation. Finally, his shoulders sagged, and he let out a resigned sigh.

"I can't. I already tried to take it out. It hurt too much. I can barely touch it. You were right, I should have gotten rid of it two days ago."

"Damn right, you should've." Gibbs set the tissue box and bottle on the TV stand beside Tony, took a pair of pliers in each hand, and leaned right up against the younger agent so he couldn't move.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut and scrunched up his face, bracing himself. "Be gentle," he squeaked.

Still leaning firmly against Tony, Gibbs put a finger on his cheek and turned his head to the right, exposing his left ear.

"Don't move, DiNozzo. Or this'll hurt a lot more than it's already gonna."

Tony was frozen, whether from terror or obedience, his colleagues couldn't tell. With one pair of needle-nose pliers, Gibbs carefully clamped the back of the stud earring. Tony whimpered.

"I can't look," Tim breathed, closing his eyes. Ellie and Abby continued to watch in morbid fascination as Gibbs used the other pair of pliers to securely grip the stud itself.

In one swift movement, he pulled the two pieces apart, sliding the stud straight out from Tony's swollen lobe.

"_AAAARRRGH!_" bellowed Tony, falling to his knees in agony, followed by a series of curses so profane that it made Tim blush and Ellie's jaw drop. Gibbs just stood beside Tony, eyebrows raised, wordlessly waiting out his agent's miniature meltdown.

When Tony finally stopped swearing, Gibbs helped him up and let him collapse into his chair, panting and sweating.

After a few seconds, he managed to gasp, "Thanks, Boss. There's no way I could've done that myself."

He turned to face his teammates, looking slightly sheepish. Ellie was rubbing her left ear as if in phantom pain from watching Tony's ordeal. Tim seemed to be conflicted between feelings of jubilation and sympathy. Abby's face was frozen in a wince.

"Did it hurt?" she whispered.

"What do you think?" Tony replied, gingerly putting a hand up to his ear, flinching even though he hadn't actually touched it.

Gibbs was still standing behind Tony's chair. He leaned over and threw the earring in Tony's trash bin. Then he reached for the bottle and box of tissues that he'd brought. Tony didn't notice. He was still slumped in his chair, looking at Abby with irritation at her question.

"Honestly? That's pretty much the worst pain I've ever felt in my entire life." He was still panting slightly, eyes watering. "I literally can't imagine any pain worse than that." He paused, then added, "Well, at least on my ear."

"You're about to," Tim said, suddenly noticing what Gibbs was up to.

"Huh?" Tony began, trying to twist around in his chair to see what was happening behind him.

Gibbs had soaked some tissues in antiseptic liquid. Before Tony could turn around, Gibbs stepped directly behind the chair and reached around to take Tony's chin firmly in his hand. He tilted his agent's head back and to the right until it was braced against Gibbs's chest.

Very gently, he held the soaked tissue against both sides of Tony's earlobe.

Gibbs only touched the ear lightly, but Tony still emitted a loud yelp when he felt the sting of the antiseptic. Gibbs held his head tight so he wouldn't shift and feel more pain than he already was.

Finally, after about twenty seconds, Gibbs let go. Tony fell forward and leaned heavily on his desk, uttering a few more choice curse words before sitting up straight again.

He scowled at his boss. "You could've warned me about that part!"

Gibbs didn't answer. He strode back to his desk and slung his backpack over one shoulder. "Gear up!"

Ellie and Tim, sparing one last look of sympathy for their colleague, returned to their desks to grab their gear. Tony, still wincing slightly from the pain, got up and followed suit.

"Hey, Boss," he said, suddenly remembering what Gibbs had mentioned in the washroom the previous day. "What did you mean when you said you knew about ear piercings from experience? Don't tell me _you_â€" "

"We'll talk about this later," Gibbs snapped. "Got a crime scene to process."

As the team headed for the elevator, Abby called after them, "Bring me lots of good evidence!"

The team stepped into the elevator. Tony tentatively reached a hand up to assess the damage to his abused ear, but Gibbs swatted it away.

"Do yourself a favor, DiNozzo. Next time you feel a mid-life crisis coming on, get a car."

"Yes, Boss," Tony replied as the elevator doors slid closed.

End
file.